

**STANFORD UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

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**THE ALASKA HUMANITIES FORUM<sup>1</sup>**

Movements in education immediately after World War II emphasized research based studies in the natural sciences. Members of the legislature saw education as a means to actively fortify the republic. This national focus in education underscored America's Cold War need for new discoveries with practical applications. By the sixties, the asymmetry in government support for education was evident to the next generation of the legislature. Federal education agendas were obscuring the humanities. The humanities were consequently orphaned by public perception.

The federal government moved to counter the disparity by promoting both academic research and educational programs in the humanities. The mission is explicitly financial. A macro grant-writing agency called the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) was established by The National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities act of 1965 ([www.neh.gov](http://www.neh.gov)). The NEH attempts to strengthen the institutional base of the humanities in America by funding scholarship, teaching, lifelong-learning, and public access to cultural and educational resources.

At a micro level, the NEH is composed of separate humanities councils located in all 50 states and 6 U.S. territories. These councils mimic the NEH's institutional goal to facilitate humanities education. The humanities council for Alaska is the Alaska Humanities Forum (AHF). The AHF is a 501(c) (3) non-profit educational organization located in Anchorage. The AHF is one of the oldest humanities councils and was founded in 1972, less than a year after the first 6 experimental councils were incubated by the NEH. The AHF has also emerged in the last ten years as the most progressive of the state councils in its efforts to expansively interpret the definition of humanities and to enlarge its role in the reinforcement of civic and cultural life.

This case documents difficulties the AHF's has undergone while attempting to understand its own goals and the subsequent proliferation of its program portfolio into areas that may not be central to the humanities. It follows the organizational story of the AHF since it pursued its first major initiative outside of grant-making operations in 1999.

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Additionally, more recent organizational endeavors to change leadership and reorient the AHF toward core pursuits in humanities education will be chronicled in light of anticipated future endowment losses if No Child Left Behind funding is eventually withdrawn by the federal government.

### **What is the AHF?: Issues of Perception**

The problem of internally understanding a mission in the humanities and outwardly presenting that notion to the public is of paramount importance to the current leadership at the AHF. The Board of Directors has been preoccupied since 2003 with the desire to present a more unified notion of their operations to the public in Alaska. Their perception is that most Alaskans do not understand what they do.

The NEH defines the term 'humanities' to include the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history to the current conditions of national life. This is a broad working definition of the humanities that the public does not conceive of when thinking of the humanities. They may only recognize literature, history, philosophy and religion as humanities. There is therefore in reality a core and periphery to the humanities from a public perspective.

Former, President and CEO Adam Thompson approached this issue by increasing the publicity of the AHF, conducting several interviews with local news, and discussing the importance of the humanities as well as their mission in conferences over the last half of his tenure that occurred from 2001-2006. One of Thompson's initial efforts was to interview for Laura Hernandez in *Humanity Viewpoint Magazine* in August 2003. He concluded his discussion of the humanities by reiterating the mission statement of the AHF, "Our mission statement says pretty well what we try to do, 'Use the wisdom and methods of the humanities to enrich the civic, intellectual, and cultural life of all Alaskans.'" Thompson often echoed the mission statement verbatim to the public without expounding upon what the humanities actually are. His later interviews reflected a growing recognition of the Board's lack of clarity on the humanities and the AHF mission. He put the following statement forward in 2006 toward the end of his experience as President and CEO of the AHF:

One of the largest issues is defining the humanities. It's an incredible range of disciplines. We are able to work with any of the categories, but we have limited resources, and always make decisions. Those choices are based on the perceived needs within the community and state.

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Thompson then described their program as running parallel with State Councils of the Arts that are funded by their own National Endowment for the Arts. He then discussed the AHF's mission expansively in terms of engendering education in art, morality, spirituality, and history. Thompson identified resources and perceived state needs as key

criteria for emphasizing certain disciplines in the humanities over others in their programs.

While Thompson's promotional efforts were periodic, and targeted the surface concerns of the Board, they did not coherently translate or further condense the core of the AHF role in any fashion to the public. Board members like Sara Tilton of the CILTA Native Corporation and Kelly Marner, Superintendent of the Anchorage School District, felt that methods of communicating their mission to the public were ephemeral (Lee 1). Other Board Members such as Dr. Gregory Lee, Chair of the Liberal Arts College at Alaska Central University and Dr. Skip Anderson, President of Alaska Central University felt the message conveyed continued to be far too broad. Member Jeremy Davenport, VP of Conoco Phillips Alaska, even believed that the AHF mission was likely confused in the public mind by the continual references to art; thus conflating their purpose with that of the Endowment of the Arts. Above all, else mission ambiguity within and outside of the AHF persisted.

### **What are the Humanities? A Deeper Understanding of the AHF's Problems with Goal Development**

The Board of Directors enlisted a member of the board stepping down to become the head of the AHF. The new President and CEO of the AHF, Dr. Gregory Lee; was hired August 2006. Dr. Lee's imperative is strategic. His first initiative has been to diagnose the AHF's practices in light of its historical mission. His approach has been to fundamentally question the purpose of the organization in order to better understand its mission and how to communicate the humanities to Alaska. Dr. Lee commissioned a benchmarking study on strategic missions in the humanities with an independent strategy and operations consultant to find an objective basis for evaluating current goals at AHF. Dr. Lee's use of an external consultant, the Foraker Consulting Group, is a first in the history of the AHF. Benchmarking work documented the historical development of the AHF's goals and located its mission in relation to both the NEH's mission as well as to the universe of missions pursued by peer humanities councils.

Foraker Consulting found the disorientation surrounding the meaning of humanities missions at the AHF to be rooted in the high level of discretion the NEH originally invested with state humanities councils to develop their own definitions. The NEH only stipulated core grant writing activities for humanities scholarship remain in place as a precursor for federal funding. The NEH did not leverage funding to influence mission statement development. The NEH also does not provide organizational oversight to ensure state councils are fulfilling their missions.

Foraker Consulting learned that every council opts for a general mission rather than setting out with a tightly bound set of objectives. Many also avoid drilling-down to explicitly define humanities categories. Of course, the NEH's mission statement and humanities definition are templates for humanities councils. The NEH's mission states, "Because democracy demands wisdom, the National Endowment for the Humanities serves and strengthens our Republic by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans," ([www.neh.gov](http://www.neh.gov)). Thus, the NEH embodies within its own framework goal connotations that humanities councils emulate with varying degree.

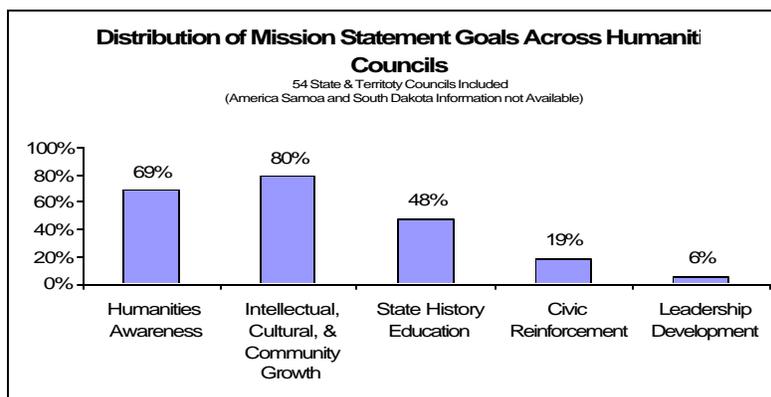
Dr. Lee’s staff conducted an internal audit of the history mission statement during the discovery and research phase of Foraker Consulting’s engagement. Of the related documents still housed at the AHF from the early seventies, memos and meeting notes indicate original AHF board and staff members were highly conscious of the NEH’s mission statement and referenced it several times during the construction of the AHF’s mission to use the methods and wisdom of the humanities to enrich the civic, intellectual, and cultural life of all Alaskans. The goal of using humanities wisdom as a progressive instrument to promote civics is a specific derivation from the references to the “wisdom” “demanded by democracy” and required to strengthen the “Republic” found in the NEH mission.

It is not surprising that the physical proximity of Alaska necessitated the use of the NEH mission as such a foundational document. But the distant locale of Alaska also may have inhibited the AHM’s readiness in the seventies to coordinate or communicate with other emerging and recently incubated humanities councils in the lower 48 states. Dr. Lee’s AHF staff found no documentation of correspondence with other nascent humanities councils or the 6 original councils.

**Benchmarking Mission Statements to Locate the Meaning of Humanities Missions**

Foraker Consulting proceeded to benchmark the mission statement of the AHF with the six original humanities councils including Georgia, Maine, Missouri, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Wyoming. Several key findings came from this exercise. The AHF is alone in emphasizing highly specific language like civics while the other missions either never reference the Republic or mention more general language than civics, like democracy and community. Half of the original councils mention history while the AHF does not. Finally, half of the councils mimic the NEH’s focus on promoting the humanities but the AHF ignores this and instead emphasizes another component of the NEH mission: to utilize the humanities instrumentally to promote the republic. Foraker Consulting concluded that the variation in emphases on mission is not only substantial between the AHF and the original councils but significant between the six original councils themselves.

A comprehensive benchmark of mission statements for all humanities councils that are on-line was also conducted. 54 councils were benchmarked alongside the AHF by Foraker Consulting. The following table lists the entire population of goals that are cited in mission statements:



The benchmarking study has provided important granularity of data for Dr. Lee to consider in his new role as President and CEO. It clumps the references of mission statements into five categories: humanities awareness, intellectual/ social/ cultural stimulation, State History, civic reinforcement, and the related but more specific mention of leadership development (which relates more expansively than civics reinforcement does to include economic leadership).

The study also collapses the historical direction the AHF has undertaken toward its own goals since inception into a comparative frame with the other humanities councils. The distribution of stated goals indicates that there tends to be a strong clustering of agreement in goals among humanities councils related to the stimulation of thought, culture, and society as being an appropriate instrumental goal central to their endeavor in the humanities.

Dr. Lee has interpreted the lack of consensus on engaging what should be characterized as a logical precursor to instrumental uses of humanities; that is promoting fundamental understandings in the humanities, as problematic not just for the AHF but for the entire national state of the humanities. He also has determined from the study that the AHF's specific pursuit of civic reinforcement is a relatively sporadic phenomenon when viewed across the spectrum of council goals, since only 10 councils see it as central to their mission.

Dr. Lee intends to ask both AHF board members and staff to consider if their mission statement as is written is the actual mission they are currently undertaking at the next Board Meeting. A corollary to this challenge is Dr. Lee and Board Treasurer Landon Carter's concern the current mission may not accurately represent a sustainable mission given financial reality.

### **The Practices of the AHF and the Politics of Undertaking Projects**

The lack of clarity in the humanities mission congenital to the AHF's NEH heritage might not have been as severe an issue had the AHF not opted to significantly move beyond its formal grant writing mandate in 1999. The AHF houses several technologies that it has incrementally accumulated over the years. AHF leadership now views the current state of their projects and the overall reach of their technologies with much concern. The programs have become overgrown. The multilayered project portfolio may not connect as directly with the humanities as is needed, not only given the current mission statement but considering the direction the mission may evolve under the leadership of Dr. Lee.

Compounding the crisis of identity at the AHF is what Carter, President and Owner of Alaska Highmark Capital, believes are long-term threats to the financial sustainability of the program portfolio. Carter fears the AHF's eventual loss of No Child Left behind money which is a robust federal income stream to the budget that has been fueling the AHF since 2001. As early as 2003, he has been cautioning his fellow Board members as well as imploring staff leadership to rethink the AHF portfolio and posit an eventual realignment of technologies with a core humanities mission.

Aside from the core grant writing function, the AHF entertains four major programs. This portfolio consists of a leadership development program called Leads Anchorage, a student exchange program called The Carter Urban-Rural Exchange

Program, a History program called Alaska History and Cultural Studies, and a child literacy program titled "Ready to Learn." The Board believes the variety of goals embedded within these programs, in conjunction with the ambiguity of the AHF's overall mission in the humanities, debilitates any hope for a unified public perception of the AHF; at least, in the short term.

Taking a snapshot of the AHF within the last ten years is instructive when depicting the identity crisis at the AHF. The grant writing function and History Curriculum Program will not be expounded upon in this case in any great detail since they both constitute core humanities education goals. They are therefore less controversial and less risky than the more radical programs to emerge at the turn of the century like Leads Anchorage and the Carter Urban-Rural Exchange. The story of how the AHF project portfolio has become populated with these diverse programs illustrates the highly political nature of power structures surrounding and enmeshing key figures and shifting goals at the AHF.

*Leads Anchorage: A Local Initiative looking for a New Home*

Even though Leads Anchorage was founded 1997 it has only come under the purview of the AHF since 1999. Leads Anchorage gestated as a program funded and administrated by the PEW Partnership for Civic Change. PEW started 10 city programs across the nation in 1997 but when seed funding ran out prominent members of the local Anchorage community who were well aware of the program's successes stepped forward to mobilize support for the continuation of the program.

Community members that fervently supported Leads Anchorage included Sara Tilton who is the CEO of CILTA an Alaska Native Corporation that invests residuals from oil revenue into capital markets. Tilton was former AHF Board Chair and is still an AHF Board Member who had been a proponent due to the access the program provided to Alaskan Natives in Anchorage. Kelly Marner, who had been an Anchorage School Board member and Board Member of United Way Anchorage also pushed in the media and among the Anchorage community to continue the Leads Anchorage Program.

Tilton and Marner campaigned among the local boards they sat on and within their social networks which included for Marner the PTA and for Tilton the Harvard Club of Anchorage to develop recurring private funding commitments from local individuals and institutions in the spring of 1998 in the amount of approximately \$35,000 annually to help support Leads Anchorage. Tilton and Marner also sat together on the board of United Way Anchorage and helped to lobby Board Treasurer Rob Howard, who is Vice President and heir to Howard Capital Partners (value oriented global investment management firm that also handles an institutional account for CILTA) to secure a \$20,000 commitment in the first year and approximately \$10,000 every year after from United Way (Lee 2). What remained in the spring of 1998 was an appropriate entity for further funding and, more importantly, program administration on a go-forward basis for Leads Anchorage.

Sara Tilton was also a Member of the AHF Board in 1998 and she leveraged her position to raise attention for Leads Anchorage among AHF staff and leadership. Then President and CEO of AHF, Matt Lindstrom who had already been interviewing for the Vice Chancellorship of the University of Alaska System, might not have been as concerned with the long term effects of adding superfluous programs to the core mission

of the AHF as he was his next career move. He was easily agreeable to Tilton's platform of including Leads Anchorage within the AHF's operations. In addition, the AHF is the only non-profit in Anchorage that has a mission explicitly including civic reinforcement as one of its central tenants. Philosophical overlap with the existing AHF mission in civics made the plan sensible to Lindstrom, since Leads Anchorage can be construed as a program that supports emerging leaders the local community.

He also stipulated that minor alterations to the program be made to include a humanities related angle within the development modules of the leadership program. The original program had twenty individuals involved in ten rigorous, full-day sessions of interviews and group activities, reading and skills-building. The cornerstones of Leads Anchorage are a one-on-one mentorship program and a group project fulfilling an already-expressed need in the community. For Lindstrom to agree to take on the Leads Anchorage program, a series of two short readings and one book in the humanities was added as curriculum for participants.

*Carter Urban-Rural Exchange Program: Senator Tom Hudson Brings "No Child Left Behind" Funds to Alaska Native Students*

The Carter Urban-Rural Exchange (CURE) is a cross cultural program aimed at providing Alaskan Native grade school through high school students a chance to study in Anchorage, while also providing urban Anchorage students the opportunity to study in rural Alasa. The program was pioneered by Alaska Senior Senator Tom Hudson's former Chief of Staff, Mitch Carter, and is inspired by the time he spent in his youth living in rural Alaska. Through the exchanges, participants experience family life, school, community and cultural activities in village and urban centers. Cross-cultural orientation sessions before and after travel prepare and enhance participant understanding of their host community's way of life. Roundtrip airfare is provided.

CURE is funded through a line item in No Child Left Behind for Alaskan Native/American Indian education. This line item began in 2001 and provides \$1 million yearly to support the implementation of CURE. The connection with CURE is predicated upon the belief that Alaskan Native access to cross cultural education and lifestyles will prevent them from being left behind in the greater scheme of Alaskan education.

CURE was designed primarily by the Carter Foundation in conjunction with former members of Hudson's staff. In addition to the student exchange, a parallel program for the exchange of teachers was also planned and added in the final stages of program conceptualization. The Carter Foundation was of course considered an inappropriate entity to house federal No Child Left Behind funds since Mitch Carter had formerly been a cabinet member in Hudson' staff. But there exist only so many non-profit education related entities located in the Anchorage area.

The navigation of No Child Left Behind funds to the AHF is a straightforward tale. In 2001 Thompson had been transitioning into his post as the new CEO and President of AHF. His background had been as the President of the Anchorage Artistic Association for 20 years. He is a very open minded leader who values input from stakeholders in his decision making processes. Thompson was very receptive to the Board's interest in Senator Hudson and the Carter Foundation's efforts to find an entity to partner with for the administration of the CURE program. Mitch Carter sat on the AHF Board in 2001 and continued until he passed away in 2003. Other Board members

naturally receptive were Tilton, who is a key spokesperson in the Anchorage community and at the AHF for Alaskan Native issues, and Anderson who has been attempting to increase Alaska Central University's own ties to rural Alaskan enrollment.

The overall scale of finance and ambition for this program also promised to increase the AHF's stake in the cultural and educational development of an underserved demographic in Alaska. With financing in place and with a convenient early platform handed off to Thompson, the subsequent intra-board lobbying was a relatively simple task and the merger was virtually assured due to the clout of Carter and Tilton and the general attractiveness of the initiative.

As with the Leads Anchorage program, a minor alteration to CURE seemed natural to allow the program to overlap enough with the AHF's mission. Students and teachers partaking in the program were required to write a retrospective document of their experience in CURE and to constitute the humanities scholarship portion of the program.

### **Administering Leads Anchorage and CURE when Financing and AHF Identity Erode: Shifting Alliances and Future Goals**

As time progressed, both Leads Anchorage and CURE achieved great success in their respective fields, driven by high amounts of participation and promotion in the local media. Word of mouth communication about the reputation of these programs also spread. But as Leads Anchorage and CURE grew in popularity, core grant writing activities and history/ humanities curriculum development efforts with school districts became further obscured. The amount of sweat equity and finance devoted to these two programs, especially CURE, also served to indicate to the AHF board that their time and resources were being devoted away from the humanities.

By 2003, four major organizational shifts were leading to a substantial alteration in the Boards perception of CURE and Leads Anchorage. First, Mitch Carter passed away and his son, Erik ascended to the AHF board. Shortly following this, another new and younger member of the Board, Dr. Lee, was added with the encouragement of Anderson. Tilton stepped down as Board Chair, and Richard Kimbo, Executive Director of the Resource Development Council became the new Board Chair. Key participants at the AHF were changing.

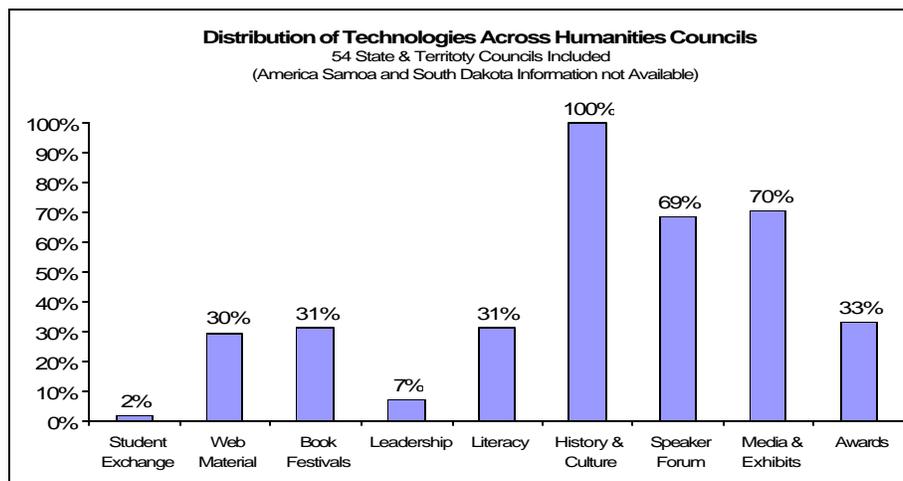
Most importantly, while the CURE program was thriving, the results of the program are considered to be difficult to measure with the type of metrics that No Child Left Behind tends to dictate. The AHF's angst about eventually losing funding in 2009 began to fester as it did at many other district and non-profits nationwide.

The AHF's annual budget is approximately \$2.5 million. No Child Left Behind funding therefore constitutes 40% of the AHF's current annual budget. Carter fears the public view of failure if funding is discontinued since the CURE has attracted much attention statewide. Every year as CURE grows it leaves behind an even larger imprint of expectations that the AHF will be unable to fulfill in its local fundraising activities if No Child Left Behind funding is withdrawn. Carter's family name is the brand name for the program and his foundation provides \$75,000 in funding.

The cycling through of newer members on the AHF Board and the reshuffling of longstanding members around key roles has lead to a new introspective outlook in light of the potential funding crisis that Carter has forecasted. The academic contingent of the

board in 2004 -that included Dr. Anderson, Dr. Lee, and Dr. Francis McAndrew of University Alaska Anchorage- interpreted many of these difficult questions about funding as indicative of a greater crisis of faith in the mission for the humanities. With the high degree of concentration in leadership and exchange programs at the AHF the academic contingent and newer members of the Board like question the value they are adding in the service of the humanities. Do these programs relate enough to the humanities or do they circumvent the humanities with only token recognition as they achieve cultural and leadership goals? If they are a humanities council then shouldn't promoting the humanities be their foremost concern?

These questions have persisted at the AHF and Dr. Lee has carried these fundamental concerns along with him to the Presidency and CEO position at AHF. Dr. Lee is preoccupied with better aligning the AHF project portfolio with a core mission in humanities. As part of his benchmarking study, Dr. Lee asked Foraker Consulting to also analyze their project portfolio in comparison to the 53 other humanities councils that have available information.



The study found that the AHF is only one of three programs to administer a leadership development program like Leads Anchorage. Even more, the AHF is the only council to offer a student exchange program. Finally, AHF is the only council to receive No Child Left Behind funding. Dr. Lee has determined that the collection of Leads Anchorage and CURE are relative outliers in the humanities education universe.

Dr. Lee has also been able to use the benchmarking study to help develop a short term strategy for attempting to unify the internal and external image of the AHF and allocate it more concretely in the realm of the humanities, at least for the next two-three years. The study found that roughly 70% of councils devote themselves to producing speaker forums on humanities subjects. Dr. Lee sees his agenda to solve the ambiguity of the AHF mission and the composition of their portfolio by beginning to move the AHF into the direction of attracting humanities speakers to speak to Alaska. The hope is to eventually bring someone of the magnitude of the Dali Lama or Cornell West. Dr. Lee's belief is that the growth of this type of program will allow the AHF to more easily phase out of CURE should funding subside in 2009. However, the future state of Leads Anchorage remains an ongoing issue due to its popularity with the older members of the Board.